



A Study Guide to Avatar

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Avatar (James Cameron, 2009) presents a glossy and glamorous veneer of cinematic beauty and thematic liberal-mindedness. The stunning look of the film and its self-proclaimed celebration of environmentalism, indigenous cultures and nature triumphing over technology ensured international box-office success – but if we scratch the surface, the picture becomes far more problematic. We do not need to dig for ‘unobtainium’ to explore Pandora and discover darker and more complex issues undermining the idyll here, nor do we need to hook up to the blue body of an avatar to get under the skin of the film and investigate how much more is going on in the post-colonial ‘heart of darkness’ of this text.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

SYNOPSIS

JAKE Sully (Sam Worthington) is a wheelchair-bound marine brought in to join the avatar project on the planet of Pandora. Dr Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) is eager to integrate into the culture of the indigenous population, the Na’vi, but a ruthless corporate overseer, Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi), and the war-mongering Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) are only interested in the planet’s resources – and they want the Na’vi out of the way. Sully assumes an ‘avatar’ body by a neurological link in order to help win over the natives, but eventually becomes enamoured with the world, the people and the beautiful Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). When the military attack Home Tree, a sacred site of the Na’vi, Sully is accused of duplicity, but regains his influence by leading Neytiri and her people into battle against the humans. After winning the war, defeating the colonel, and ousting Selfridge and most of the humans from the planet, Sully discards his human body entirely in order to live on Pandora and stay with Neytiri permanently.

BACKGROUND

Avatar broke box-office records to become the top-grossing worldwide release of all time. It also won three Academy Awards and has spawned two sequels, currently in production. Shot

with a 3D camera, the film’s CGI animation, motion-capture techniques and visual effects received much critical acclaim, although the story and characterisation reviewed less favourably. Generic plot elements drew comparisons to *Pocahontas* (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995), *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and *Fern Gully: The Last Rainforest* (Bill Kroyer, 1992), but this has not prevented the film continuing to play to sell-out audiences, raking up impressive DVD/Blu-ray sales and even being re-released in cinemas in an ‘extended’ form.

POINTS OF DISCUSSION

In computing, an avatar is the onscreen graphical representation of a computer user, but the term derives from the Sanskrit word for the descent of a deity to earth. The word ‘navi’ means prophet in Hebrew and the name of Pandora’s divine mother, Eywa, evokes both the ancient Greek earth goddess Gaia and the name of God in Hebrew, Yahweh. Moreover, Pandora refers to the protagonist of a famous Greek myth about the dangers of curiosity, the discovery of hidden secrets and the importance of hope in times of great evil.

- What does an understanding of the intertextual references here bring to a viewing of the film? Consider the names of other key characters, such as Sully and Grace, or Selfridge and Quaritch – what do the words actually mean, or what do they sound like? In a script grounded in the importance

of understanding languages, what is being revealed about the characters through their names?

Avatar has obviously generated an extensive and intense fan base. The film had such a significant impact on some viewers that it actually made them ‘feel blue’: people were treated for depression because they couldn’t visit the fictional world of Pandora.¹

- In your opinion, why has this film been so popular?
- What does the film’s tagline – ‘Enter the World’ – suggest? (The term ‘mythopoeia’, invented by Tolkien, is worth noting here.²)
- What does the appeal of *Avatar* imply about our need for fantasy worlds, the significance of their effect on us and the ways we interact with texts?
- What characterises the other films *Avatar* has been compared to? Also consider some of Cameron’s previous movies, such as *Titanic* (1997), *The Abyss* (1989), *Aliens* (1986) and *The Terminator* (1984).
- Most of the major promotional posters for the film juxtapose the faces of Sully and Neytiri as two halves making a whole. What is being visually indicated about the characters, the film’s attitude to race and the moral of the story? (Think about how colour is being presented here as the new ‘black and white’.)



WATCHING THE FILM

ANALYSING KEY SCENES

Terrorism

Numerous critics have remarked on the film's associations with the 'War on Terror' and the overt commentary on September 11. The destruction of Home Tree flags visual connections to footage

troops – what is being revealed here about his attitudes to racial conflict? Compare this to Sully's calls to war for the Na'vi – what do you notice?

- Some critics of the film are therefore concerned about the apparent advocacy of 'eco-terrorism'. What is this? How is the film presenting it? Why is it a flawed solution to environmental issues?

tional, and the violation of their habitat becomes a 'rape of the land' that causes tangible pain and trauma.

- The romantic sex scene between Sully and Neytiri is followed by the assault of the bulldozer into the sacred grove, with violent masculine technology attacking Pandora's mother nature. What is being revealed in the juxtaposition of these scenes?

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of the falling World Trade Center, while the colonel explains, 'I need to know how to force their cooperation, or hammer them hard if they won't', announcing that they will 'blast a crater in their racial memory' and 'fight terror with terror'. However, this symbolism is unstable, as it establishes the humans as both the al-Qaeda terrorists and the US military.

- Why is this problematic? Examine the colonel's opening speech to the

Sexual violence

Imperialism is often explored in texts as an act of sexual violence: the invasion and subjugation of a culture perceived to be more gentle and innocent by a more tyrannical and powerful one. Race becomes conflated with sexuality here, as does the physical body and the social or environmental space. In *Avatar*, the Na'vi's connection to their world is manifestly physical, spiritual and emo-

- Compare also the colonel's vicious, panting attack on Neytiri at the end of the film with her rescue of Sully in his human form – what assumptions are being made about gender relationships here?

The coding of imperialism as sexual violence in *Avatar* becomes distinctly problematic when examining the Na'vi's own relationship with the natural world. Despite their claims to be in harmony

with the planet and its creatures, their domestication of wild animals is, in itself, a form of colonisation: an exerting of will and power to enslave a reluctant species.

- Does anything distinguish the Na'vi's use of the resources of their world from the humans' intentions?

There are clear sexual connotations with the Na'vi's plug-in ponytails – Dr Grace warns Sully 'Don't play with that: you'll go blind'. However, these appendages are also used to capture and subdue the local wildlife, and claims that you will know an Ikran chooses you 'if he tries to kill you' not only remind us of the logic of the colonising army ('force their cooperation') but suggest a disturbing 'no means yes' philosophy.

- Re-watch the 'choosing' of an Ikran scene. How might the imagery and language used in this scene unsettle our idyllic perceptions of the Na'vi?

The conquering hero

Perhaps one of the most disturbing moments in the film is Sully's reconciliation with the Na'vi after he is revealed to have been part of the genocidal plot to attack Home Tree:

Outcast. Betrayer. Alien. I was in the place the eye does not see. I needed their help. And they needed mine. But to ever face them again, I was going to have to take it to a whole new level.

- How culpable is Sully in what has happened to the Na'vi? Is he punished, or rewarded, for his actions, and why?
- We might expect Sully to feel guilt, shame, remorse and humility at this moment. What emotions does he seem to be displaying instead? We might also expect him to humble himself before the Na'vi and beg forgiveness. Analyse the scene of his return closely – what does he do instead? What exactly has been 'taken to a whole new level'?

Sully's actions here have uncomfortable imperial associations: buying off 'primitive' cultures with worthless gifts or acts, or setting up colonising powers as gods and leaders through displays of apparently divine abilities that play on local superstitions (recollect the original Hindu meaning of 'avatar'). Yet the Na'vi fall to their knees before the man who betrayed them and follow him into a war that results in high casualties, including the convenient killing off of all possible

male heirs and rival leaders to his eventual ascension to power.

- 'You fly now, with me! My brothers! Sisters! And we will show the Sky People that they cannot take whatever they want! And that this ... this is our land!' What presumptions are being made in this speech? What are the implications of it coming from Sully, and not Neytiri for example?
- What defines a hero for you? How heroic is Sully?

Genocide and suicide

Both races in *Avatar* show themselves willing to wipe out the other in order to achieve their goals. At the close of the film, the majority of the 'alien' human race have been banished from Pandora to return to their own 'dying planet'.

- We live in a post-colonial world coming to terms with itself as global village, and specifically a country that prides itself on its multiculturalism. Why is segregation, the simplistic model for finally resolving racial tensions in *Avatar*, so problematic in the light of our real-world experiences? (Think about issues of immigration, refugees and native title.)





Although it is not made explicit, Sully does in fact commit suicide at the end of the film: his final words are actually a suicide note, and the final scene marks his romanticised death and then 're-birth' as a Na'vi.

- In the light of this, how happy is the 'ever after' here? What is being suggested about people with disabilities, living successfully with other cultures and suicide?

EXPLORING KEY THEMES

Race and orientalism

It was noted earlier that in exploring race issues, texts can often establish the coloniser and the colonised as binaries: powerful male/helpless female, technological/natural, civilised/savage.³

- Make a list of the racial and cultural attributes of the Na'vi and the humans. What is being valued and devalued?

In a post-colonial world, however, there are overt problems with this kind of simplistic division. Even in a fantasy text, we can see parallels being drawn here with real cultural experiences, such as those

of Native Americans, Haitians, Arabs and even Indigenous Australians being persecuted by invading imperial powers.

Yet this is essentially a romantic, reductive and orientalist depiction of racial and cultural difference. Orientalism is the framework of false assumptions that uphold Western attitudes towards Eastern cultures, whereupon Western texts (establishing themselves as the cultural and racial norm) eroticise and exoticise the perceived Other – that which is different and unfamiliar.⁴

- How are the Na'vi being presented as exotic and romantic? Why is this orientalisering in *Avatar* such a significant concern for our analysis? What are the dangers of creating any kind of binary with issues of racial tension?

Nature and technology

The 'us' and 'them' dichotomy in the film may change with Sully's experiences, but remains a distinct contrast of nature and spiritualism with technology and industrialism. Thus, the Na'vi are pantheists (in that their religion, their god and the natural world are one and the same), while the humans idolise power,

science, mechanics and computers.

- We are clearly being invited to side with the Na'vi and their belief system (and reject the beliefs of our own villainous race), but think about how this invitation is actually being delivered. In acknowledging our experience as viewers, the movie's production values, and the medium of film itself, why must we consider the environmental 'moral' of *Avatar* ultimately hypocritical?

Colonisation

The film's model of using an 'avatar' to connect with a new culture is actually fraught with anthropological problems. In post-colonial studies, the term is 'mimesis': a colonising force mimics the local population. On the surface, this is an effort to 'fit in', but in actuality it satirises and reconstructs the identity of the indigenous inhabitants and becomes the kind of racism implicit in black-face parodies or the recent Russian ice skater scandal with their mimicry of Aboriginal tribal dress.

- What do the humans (and Sully in particular) gain in assuming a 'local' body? What are they able to disguise? However humanitarian Dr Grace's

original intentions were, why is this project still a colonising act?

- Consider some of the other cultural insensitivities at play here. How is the study of another race still upholding a sense of racial superiority? Why is Dr Grace's death considered more significant than the deaths of any of the Na'vi in battle? Why should it take someone like Sully to 'save the day'?

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

CREATIVE RESPONSES

- Write a letter from Sully's brother before he died, explaining why he has joined the avatar project and what he hopes the program will achieve.

in which the Na'vi interact with their environment.

- Invent some Na'vi words for things the humans have (perhaps unintentionally) introduced to Pandora – include detailed definitions.
- Write a new scene in which Neytiri tells the story of the battle to the next generation of Na'vi – what details might she emphasise and what might she leave out?
- Write a poem to commemorate the death of one of the characters.
- Design a new poster for the film that encapsulates what you feel to be the main theme of the text.

*O*rientalism is the framework of false assumptions that uphold Western attitudes towards Eastern cultures.

- Design a diagram to show the hierarchy of power in the Na'vi society and then another for the human corporation.
- Write a translated diary entry from one of the Na'vi people on their perceptions of the humans in general, and Sully in particular.
- Write a report by Dr Grace on the ways

CRITICAL RESPONSES

- Revisit the initial questions about the meaning of names in the film. How have these meanings been changed, confirmed or complicated upon analysis of the text?
- Think back to the original promotional posters – did the film fulfil your expectations? Are things 'made whole'?

- What does *Avatar* ultimately congratulate and reassure us about?
- What is it asking us to side with – and against?
- What are the problems with its solutions for racial and social issues?

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Endnotes

- ¹ 'Avatar Perfection Causing Depression', *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 January 2010, <<http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/feature/avatar-perfection-causing-depression/story-e6frf nv0-1225819063598>>, accessed 15 September 2010.
- ² J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *The Tolkien Reader*, London, HarperCollins, 2001.
- ³ Kim Edwards, 'The Great Space Race: Racial Constructs and Alien Invasions in Recent Science Fictions', *Screen Education*, no. 58, 2010, pp.58–64.
- ⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*, London, Penguin Books, 1978.

